



Dr Kelly's religion

I was raised in the Baha'i faith, to which David Kelly was a convert

Ziba Norman

This afternoon I made my usual early December pilgrimage to the local stationer in search of a diary for 2004. While leafing through a pile and checking that my choice contained all the necessary information, I made what at the time seemed an astounding discovery. The Letts diary I had chosen had a page listing the world's major religions together with details of their holy days, and the little known religion in which I was raised, the Baha'i faith, was positioned after Roman Catholicism and before Buddhism. For me this was a moment of epiphany. The faith (as it was referred to in my household) had come of age; it was now an established religion, standing proudly among the others.

I recalled the many embarrassing moments of my American girlhood, attempting to explain to Jewish and Christian schoolfriends about our beliefs. Most of them assumed, at least at first hearing, that Baha'i was some sort of cranky new age cult. I eventually became adept at handling these enquiries, my shorthand description comparing it to Unitarianism, and describing the faith as more of a philosophy than a religion. After all, the Baha'is had no paid clergy, met in the homes of fellow believers, and observed no religious rituals.

The news of David Kelly's suicide, and his conversion to the faith some four years before, catapulted the little known religion into the spotlight in Britain, and along with it came the usual misrepresentations. In some newspaper reports it was described as a cult which advocated suicide, or at least did not believe suicide to be a sin - a fact that is true only in as much as the Baha'is do not have a concept of sin in the Christian sense. I was in California when the news broke and I began receiving a stream of emails from friends who knew of my connection to the faith, all asking me to help separate fact from fiction.

So what exactly does the Baha'i faith stand for and how did it emerge? The Baha'is trace their origins back to 19th-century Persia. It was a time of millenarian fervour and religious expectancy. In 1844, a young merchant in Shiraz, Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad, began to teach a new faith. He assumed the title of Bab, meaning "the gate," and spoke of the coming of a prophet who would usher in a new spiritual age. His popularity was a threat to the clerical classes of Persia, who persecuted Bab and his followers (known as Babis) and eventually had him killed on 9th July 1850. One of these early Babis was my great-great-grandfather - another was Baha'u'llah (real name Mirza Husayn 'Ali) the founder of the Baha'i faith who declared himself to be the prophet of which the Bab foretold.

As with most other religions, the stories of these early believers - most from middle-class Shi'i families - is marked by heroism and sacrifice as the religion was forced underground. My own ancestor, who was from a wealthy family in Shiraz, left with his brother to escape the persecutions. They walked for many months until they were sure they had evaded the authorities. Eventually my ancestor settled in a small village in northern Iran called Gazvin. His brother did not make it, dying along the way from illness.

At about the same time, Baha'u'llah was accused of involvement in a plot to kill the shah, and after several months in prison in Tehran he was exiled to Baghdad in 1853. It was there, ten years later, that he declared himself to be the prophet for the new era, and the leader whom the Babis had awaited. A series of further exiles led him to Akka, on the bay of Haifa, where he spent over 20 years of his life in prison, before his death in 1892. The faith now has its headquarters in Haifa, Israel, with its governing body, the Universal House of Justice, based there.

By liberal humanist standards there is nothing objectionable about the faith. The basic beliefs include the elimination of all forms of prejudice and the equality of all races; the equality of men and women; the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty, and creation of a world federation; a belief in the harmony of science and religion; a belief that religious truth must be independently investigated, not handed down by a clerical class; the establishment of a universal language, to be taught to all children around the world. Crowning this list of good intentions is a belief in the progressive nature of religion. The Baha'is consider themselves to be the bearers of the religion for this age. Christianity, Islam and the other great religions have divided the world - the Baha'i revelation is meant to be a force for uniting it and establishing a universal human civilisation, referred to as the new world order. Strife and turmoil may be inevitable, especially in the middle east, but then a "greater peace" will reign.



This gives the Baha'is a strongly missionary spirit and teaching the faith is essential to being a full member. Baha'is consider it a duty to go off "pioneering" usually in poor countries and they are to be found in the most remote corners of the globe.

There are said to be about 5m Baha'is in the world - although the true number is probably closer to half that. The largest "assemblies" are probably in India and Iran. In Iran, before the 1979 revolution there were over 500,000 believers, making up the country's largest religious minority. Since the revolution some 200 Baha'is have been executed for their religious beliefs. In the west, believers tend to belong to the professional middle classes; many are active members of NGOs. In Britain, according to the Baha'i headquarters, there are 5,700 members. David Kelly was treasurer of the local Spiritual Assembly for an area called the Vale of the White Horse, covering part of Oxfordshire and Berkshire. The official membership figure for the US is 140,000, but the number of active members is probably much lower. There appears to be quite a high attrition rate, especially in the US. Many people, it seems, are drawn to the faith in youthful exuberance, but later find it more restrictive than it appears.

The idea of unity applies very strongly to the faith itself. As a child at a Baha'i school, I was taught that we were the only world religion that did not have sects. Very little was said about the early challenges to the succession and the establishment of alternative Baha'i groups. In fact the Baha'i faith does have its sects and alternative leaders. One of the most established is headquartered in Roswell, New Mexico, and calls itself the Mother Baha'i Council. But they are neither recognised nor discussed in mainstream Baha'i circles.

The faith's utopian aims are perfectly laudable as far as they go, but there is an underlying authoritarian streak, which seems to stand at odds with the writings of Baha'u'llah (meaning Glory of God).

The Baha'is are indeed rigorous in their moral standards. They do not drink, are barred from joining political parties (which are seen as promoting disunity), are forbidden to lie, and are often conscientious objectors - all of which makes this apparently ideal liberal, all-embracing religion of the modern age more difficult to practice than it might seem. Could it be that this tension created a great strain for Kelly? We know that he discussed aspects of his work with fellow believers and may have felt that he had some ability to move events towards the "greater peace." The attempt to square his allegiance to his religion and his professional duty may have led him to the decision to take his own life, in the belief that he had failed to uphold the high standards of the faith he had chosen.

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